

The Problems of Iranian Language Learners in Correctly Using German Prepositions

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Abstract

Due to their various types and forms in different languages, prepositions are assumed as a difficult issue in teaching foreign languages. Thus the authors of the present article carried out a field test with the goal of analyzing the use of prepositions by elementary learners of German. The findings of the test confirm the problems students have in using German prepositions. This article is an attempt to compare Persian and German prepositions. The comparison reveals that prepositions in two languages are in no one-to-one relationship with each other. The findings of this research show that German and Persian prepositions are different on three levels: 1. Meaning 2. Grammatical function 3. Sentential position. Furthermore, German prepositions are so various in form and content that it is almost impossible for a learner to make correspondence between the prepositions of the two systems.

Keywords: Teaching German, prepositions, grammar, position of prepositions, error

1. Introduction

After a field test carried out by the author from 90 learners and students of German, it was shown that the students had a number of problems in using prepositions and the way they are practically utilized. The field test, which was a multiple choice exam, aimed to evaluate learners' command of using German prepositions. The analysis of the learners' answers showed the existence of many errors in using the prepositions. This motivated the authors to understand the reason for this shortcoming by studying German prepositions and comparing them with their Persian counterparts. German prepositions have many meanings, and a preposition could be used to denote spatial, temporal and dimensional aspects, among many others. The variety and high number of prepositions are the obstacles to an objective observation of this issue. Therefore, this research attempts to study a few frequent German prepositions and to compare them with Persian prepositions. Finally, given the findings of the study, we will analyze the problems in learning German prepositions.

This is a comparative study of Persian and German prepositions with the final goal of understanding the challenges in learning German prepositions by Iranian students of German. To find the challenges under question, the study will first consider the cases of frequent errors derived from the field test, and then it will embark upon defining these prepositions, comparing them with source and target language, and stating their similarities and differences.

2. Literature Review

Comparative studies have been typically used in linguistics because when different languages face each other, comparison is by no means inevitable. Some figures such as Krzeszowski (1991) have stated that comparative studies date back to thousands years ago since comparisons between Latin and Greek have been on run in the 12th century (Sternemann/Gutschmidt, 1989). Nickel (1995) names Sir William Jones as the pioneer in comparative linguistics, who studied the differences and similarities of Sanscrit and European languages. His studies are a model for latter research on Sanscrit, Latin and Greek. In Germany, Friedrich Schlegel started comparative study on language. Subsequently, influenced by Schlegel's thoughts, Franz Bopp performed comparative studies on Indoeuropean languages, and he published a book on this issue in 1816.

The history of comparative linguistics in the twentieth century could be categorized into three stages as follows:

The first stage which is the start of comparative linguistics and goes back to the 1960. Robert Lado and Charles C. Fries established what later became known as Contrastive Hypothesis. In Comparative Hypothesis, the assumption is that students learn foreign language on the basis of their mother tongue. The learner adapts the structure of his/her first language to that of the second language. In other words, it is presumed that the similarities between the mother tongue and the foreign language eases the process of learning, while on the other hand, the differences lead to interruption and interferences. Lado (1957) published a book named *Linguistic Across Culture* and stated that behaviorism is relevant to teaching foreign language, leading to a strong claim in comparative linguistics hypothesis. Following this claim, comparative hypothesis had it that the errors of learners could be predicted in the light of their mother tongue patterns. However, this hypothesis is no more valid.

The second stage or the period in which comparative linguistic was rather unfashionable began from 1959. Chomsky was a critic of comparative linguistics hypothesis, who in 1959 disparaged the hypothesis in his book entitled as *Contrastive Analysis Approach*. After the emergence of the criticisms, another hypothesis called *Identity Hypothesis* was formed under the influence of Corder (1967), and Dulay and Burt (1974). This hypothesis formulated that the learning of foreign language happens in the same way mother tongue acquisition takes place. Comparative Hypothesis, by and large, was criticized because for its claim to predict errors according to the first language of learners.

The third stage concerns the return to Comparative Hypothesis which was the case in 1970s and 1980s manifested in theory and practice of foreign language teaching. This return was influenced by a new outlook *interlanguage hypothesis* toward language, established by Selinker (1972). Since the renewal of comparative hypothesis, it has been used in studies of Comparative Linguistics especially in cases of first language interference in learning a foreign language.

Given the new attitude toward Comparative Hypothesis, many studies have focused on German grammar. For example, Rauh (1995) analyzed German and English prepositions comparatively. Fries (1988) studied German and Greek prepositions; Griebhaber (1999) focused on Turkish and German, and Dengscherz (2009) worked on the prepositions of German and Hungry. German prepositions have been also studied by several Persian researchers of language teaching. However, in all of the published works, prepositions are merged as a section of grammar in German grammar treatise. Zoroufi (1990), Alborzi (1997) and Mehrabi/ Ershad (2003), among others, have carried out comparative studies on Persian and German prepositions.

3. Methodology

The present article is a small part of a study that cannot be included in this article due to its big size. This article seeks to answer this question: why do Iranian learners have problems in the use of prepositions in German language especially during the first years of learning? In most tests and interviews with learners, they had problems in the use of prepositions. The main reason of this problem was the interference of Persian language, their mother tongue, with German language.

3.1 Research Method

To answer this question, a study including two theoretical and experimental parts was performed. The number of participants in this test was 90 students of German language from different cities of Iran aged 18-30 years old. The proportion (ratio) of women was 76% and men 24%. This test was performed in Tehran in 2013 and 2014 academic year and included different parts. But in this article, only some multiple choice questions were used. The theoretical part of this study included the comparison of some high-frequent prepositions in two languages of Persian and German as intralingual, bilateral and adirectional. Prepositions were studied in terms of meaning and place of prepositions in two languages and also the grammar of prepositions in noun and the related pronoun. Then, the differences and similarities of prepositions in German and Persian languages were specified. In the experimental part of this study, a multiple choice test was designed for the field study of problems in Iranian learners while using German prepositions. This test was prepared according to A2 and B2 language levels and also by modeling the classification of language levels in the European Union (Trim et al 2001).

3.2 Data Analysis

Since only 10 questions of the main test were used in this article, the analysis of answers was given as the percentage of wrong answers versus the percentage of correct answers. To show the analysis results of this test, descriptive statistics were used and to summarize data in this article, diagrams or charts were used.

4. Discussion

In a previous study, we found that the number of prepositions in Persian is less than the number of German

prepositions. However, some of Persian prepositions have the function of adverb and noun as well, thus noun and adverb could sometimes play the role of a preposition.

4.1 Prepositions

Preposition is also called preword or anterior letter since it happens before words in a sentence. Grammarians have defined preposition in a different way and have made distinct categorization of this part of speech. Bateni (1990) divided prepositions into two categories. The first was those with no *Kasre Ezafe* (Note 1) such as *ba* (with), *ta* (till), *az* (from), *dar* (in), *be* (to), *bar* (upon), *joz* (except), and the second category are those which have *Kasre Ezafe* such as *kenar-e* (besides), *lab-e* (edge), *bar-e* (upon), *baray-e* (for), *nazd-e* (before), *az baray-e* (as for), *bedun-e* (without) etc.

Givi and Anwari (2009) divide them to simple* and compound categories. Simple prepositions include those with one unit such as *az* (from), *be* (to), *ta* (till), *joz* (except) etc. Compound prepositions two or more than two parts such as *az baray-e* (as for), *dar piş-e* (in front) etc. From Givi and Anwari's viewpoint (ibid), prepositions connect a word or a group of words to a verb, noun or adjective. What is located after a preposition is called complement. Homayounfar (1963) used "anterior preposition" as a term for preposition and believed that they all come before a noun or noun phrase.

Another division of prepositions in Persian is based on the use of *Kasre Ezafe*. The division includes three subcategories:

In the third group, no *Kasre Ezafe* is used: *az*, *dar*, *ta*, *be* (in, till, to, from)

The second group includes those for which the use of *Kasre Ezafe* is optional: *sar*, *beyn*, *kenar*, *biroun*, *poşt* (top, out, beside, between, back).

The third group includes prepositions for which the use of *Kasre Ezafe* is obligatory: *rou-ye*, *touy-e*, *pahlouy-e* (on, inside, next to).

Now we shall focus on German prepositions. There various opinions on the number of German prepositions. Wittich (1967) states that the number is finite and countable, and on the contrary Engle (1996) thinks they are infinite. In different sources of German grammar, prepositions are defined variously, and there are different categorization of this class.

In Duden's (1995) Grammatik, prepositions are defined as non-inflectional. They determine the grammatical form of a noun to which they are connected. This feature is called "Kasus" in German. "Präposition" is derived from Latin praeponere, which means to become in an anterior location. Lutz (1999) believes that prepositions are non-inflectional. He believes that they appear with nouns or noun phrases, and they determine "Kasus" or the grammatical role of the nouns. Understanding the meanings of many German prepositions is a difficult task for language learners. Their context of use is very diverse. Some prepositions are meaningless on their own, and their meaning is affected by the type of verb or noun they accompany:

<i>verantwortlich sein für</i>	to have a responsibility
<i>die Sehnsucht nach</i>	to miss something
<i>abhängen von</i>	to depend on something

German prepositions are categorized according to their function. However, one preposition could find place in all of the groups. For example *auf* could be categorized in four groups:

- prepositions with spatial functions (local) such as *in*, *auf*, *zu*, *bei*
- Prepositions with temporal functions (temporal) such as *ab*, *an*, *auf*, *bei*
- prepositions with fixed functions (modal) such as *an*, *auf*, *aus*
- prepositions with causal functions (causal) such as *auf*, *aus*, *halber*
- preposition that are used to state the contrast and opposition (concessiv) such as *trotz*, *ungeachtet*.

4.2 The Position of Prepositions

In Persian, prepositions are called anterior prepositions or prewords. As these names suggest, the location is deeply related to nature of prepositions. In modern Persian, the position of prepositions is before a noun or noun phrase. This position could be only violated in literary texts where preposition are observed to follow a noun or noun phrase as shown in the following:

ço beşnid rostam sar-aş çire-h gaşt *ja-han piş-e çeşm andar-aş tir-eh gaşt* (Note 2)

As Rostam heard the news, he fainted The world became dark before his eyes (Book of Kings by Ferdowsi, translation is ours)

be bidari-yaş fetn-eh bar χat wa χaal be χaab anadaraş payband-e χial (Note 3)

While awake, devilry with his lines and spots In his sleep, he depends on imagination (Saadi, Boustan, the translation is ours).

Unlike Persian in which prepositions often come before a noun or noun phrase, in German, prepositions have different locations. prepositions could be both before or after a noun or on the both sides of a noun, noun phrase or pronoun.

In German, preposition is called “adposition”. It is categorized into four groups according to their location:

1. Präposition
2. Postposition
3. Prä- Poststellung
4. Zirkumposition

Many German prepositions are located “Präposition” and happen before a noun or noun phrase. They affect the grammatical role of the noun they follow e.g. *Für meine Mutter*.

Some are in “Postposition” i.e. they are after a noun or noun phrase and affect the grammatical role of the noun preceding them. Such prepositions are not very frequent e.g. *Er kam dem Vater zuliebe*.

Prepositions with Prä- Poststellung“ locations such as *entgegen, entlang, gegenüber, gemäß, nach, ungeachtet, wegen, zufolge* can become both before and after a noun or noun phrase. For example *Gegenüber dem Meister/ Dem Meister gegenüber*. Prepositions in “Zirkumposition” are located before and after the noun as in: *Um seines Vaters willen*.

The only preposition that follows a noun in Persian is *ra* (a preposition used for objects) that comes right after the object. For example in the following sentence, the underlined word is the preposition located after the object *ra*.

Ketab ra χandam.

I read the book. (translation is ours).

The location of *ra* could determine the object, and if a shift of location happens, the object is also changed.

In the sentence *man ghaza-ye hen-di ra ba salad χord-am*. (I ate the Indian food with salad). The object is Indian food. However, when *ra* is put after *salad*, it becomes the object. The translation of the both sentence in German is one: *Ich habe das indische Essen mit Salat gegessen*.

In his book named “German Grammar”, Engel (1988) believes that prepositions have a noun phrase and determine their grammatical function. Grammatical function is called “Kasus” in German, yet there is no equivalent in Persian. As mentioned in the above section, Persian prepositions precede a complement, but in German, the grammatical function of words relevant to prepositions differs depending on the type of prepositions.

4.3 Prepositions Determine “Kasus”

Each German preposition determines the grammatical function of the noun, noun phrase or pronoun it accompanies, called “Kasus”. These functions include Nominativ, Akkusativ, Dativ, Genitiv. Nouns, pronouns and adjectives are inflected according to the above conditions.

German prepositions determine the grammatical function of the noun or pronoun they accompany. German prepositions are categorized based on the grammatical function they receive.

- Prepositions that give the case “Akkusativ” grammatical function to the noun or noun phrase they accompany.
für, bis, je, pro, um, wider, ohne, gegen
- Prepositions that give the case “Dativ” grammatical function to the noun or noun phrase they accompany.
aus, bei, binnen, entgegen, entsprechend, fern, gegenüber, gemäß, laut, mit (mitsamt), nach, nächst, nahe, seit, von, zu, zuliebe, zuwider

- Prepositions that give the case “Genitiv” grammatical function to the noun or noun phrase they accompany.

abseits, abzüglich, angesichts, anhand, anstelle, aufgrund, ausgangs, außerhalb, beiderseits, dank, diesseits, eingangs, einschließlich, halber, hinsichtlich, infolge, inmitten, innerhalb, jenseits, kraft, laut, mangels, mittels, oberhalb, seitens, statt, trotz, unbeschadet, ungeachtet, unterhalb, unweit, vorbehaltlich, während, wegen, zugunsten, zwecks.

The above prepositions need a grammatical function while the following nine prepositions could create two different grammatical functions depending on the verb they accompany: *in, an, auf, über, neben, zwischen, hinter, vor, unter.*

Distinguishing between the case “Akkusativ” and “Dativ” depends on the type and condition of a sentence. If the sentence contains a verb that signifies movement toward a goal, it is called “Richtungsergänzung” in German. The above prepositions impose “Akkusativ” function on their preceding noun or noun phrase e.g.

Am Sonnabend gehen wir ins Kino. (Akkusativ) Translation: we went to cinema at Sunday night.

Am Sonnabend waren wir im Kino. (Dativ) Translation: we were in cinema at Sunday night.

Although the first sentence shows a movement toward cinema, the second one includes inaction, a circumstance with no movement which is called “Situativergänzung”. In this situation, *in* has given its preceding noun a “Dativ” function. It is worthy to mention that determining whether a verb shows movement or inaction is rather tricky. On some occasions two functions could be used for a single verb.

Sara hat ihre Sachen in den/ dem Koffer eingepackt. Translation: Sara has put her stuff in the suitcase.

Peter hat sich in das/ dem Zimmer eingeschlossen. Translation: Peter has detained himself in the room.

In the above two sentences, both grammatical functions could be used. The identification of this is difficult for those who are not native speakers of German. Language learners often face great challenges in correctly using and determining grammatical function. However, a few certain prepositions make no grammatical functions such as *Zug um Zug*.

5. Field Test

The field test was run to analyze the use of prepositions by 90 Iranian learners during 2013 and 2014 in Tehran. The test showed that this issue is very difficult. The participants had problem in selecting German prepositions. The following ten sentences were chosen from the field test. The participants were required to mark the correct preposition.

- *-Wo sitzt Maria? - Maria sitzt Sessel.*
a) *auf dem* b) *über dem* c) *im* d) *am*
- *-Wohin verstreute er seine Kleider? -Er verstreute seine Kleider ganze Zimmer.*
a) *auf das* b) *ins* c) *über das* d) *ans*
- *-Wohin fährt Erhan im Sommer? -Erhan fährt im Sommer Türkei.*
a) *nach der* b) *zur* c) *in die* d) *auf die*
- *-Wohin stellen Sie die Stehlampe? -Ich stelle sie Ecke.*
a) *an die* b) *auf die* c) *über die* d) *in die*
- *-Wo warten die Schüler? - Die Schüler warten Bushaltestelle.*
a) *in der* b) *auf der* c) *an der* d) *bei der*
- *-Wo kauft er das Buch? - Er kauft das Buch Schreibwarengeschäft.*
a) *im* b) *am* c) *auf dem* d) *über dem*
- *Viele Ausländer studieren Universität Hamburg.*
– *in der* b) *an der* c) *auf der* d) *bei der*
- *Ach, da ist Lena. Sie steigt gerade Bus.*
a) *im* b) *in den* c) *auf den* d) *auf dem*
- *Wohin geht Manuel morgens? - Er geht morgens Post.*
a) *zur* b) *bei der* c) *an die* d) *nach der*

- -Wann gehen Sie schlafen? -Ich gehe schon um 22 Uhr Bett.
a) ins b) auf das c) nach dem d) über das

Table 1 shows the responses of the participants in the test. It also shows the number of correct, incorrect and blank responses shown by percentage. Table 1 shows that many of the learners had problem in choosing the correct preposition.

Table 1. The responses of the participants

Question	Correct answer	Incorrect answer	Blank
1	6.7%	93.3%	0
2	20.1%	73.3%	6.6%
3	26.7%	73.3%	0
4	26.7%	73.3%	0
5	33.4%	66.6%	0
6	33.4%	66.6%	0
7	30.1%	63.3%	6.6%
8	40%	60%	0
9	36.8%	56.6%	6.6%
10	43.3%	56.7%	0

Many responses on the part of the students and emergence of errors in answering the questions confirm that students have difficulty in using prepositions correctly. A look at the table shows that questions 1 to 4 had the most erroneous answers. The reasons behind these errors could be diverse, but the major problem is due to the interference from the mother tongue of the learners. The structures of their first language affect their learning of the second.

Interference is the impact of mother tongue on learning a foreign language, which intentional or unintentionally occupies the mind of learners in the beginning of learning a new language. Furthermore, knowing other languages might as well affect the learning of a new foreign language. For example, someone who has learned English as his first foreign language and is learning German as the second foreign language could be under the influence of English structure, rules and pronunciation in his use of German. It can be stated that the majority of those who learn a foreign language experience such interferences. However, interference does not always lead to error and it can pace up the process of learning in some cases. With respect to interference, Wode (1988) states that learners transfer their knowledge of their mother tongue or a foreign language they have already learned. Ellis (1986) also believes that interference is no a conscious act and happens automatically in the mind of learners. From the viewpoint of Kleppin (1997), the reason behind interference is the comparison of mother tongue (Persian here) with foreign tongue (German here). This comparison is automatic in the mind of learners. However, one cannot deny that the less similarity between the two languages, the easier the process of learning will be. The more distant they are, the harder it will be for a learner to learn the foreign language. In this case, the learning will be more time consuming and demands more effort on the part of the learner.

The use of prepositions in German is different from that of their Persian counterparts. In some cases the meaning of prepositions are completely different and for some no equivalent exists in Persian. Depending on their level, the learners had to choose the correct prepositions, but they made many errors.

In the first sentence, many learners chose *Maria sitzt auf dem Sessel* as the correct answer. The reason was the interference from Persian phrase *rou-ye mobl neşestan* (sitting on sofa), which affected the mind of the learners. The right answer was the first sentence *sitzt im Sessel*, which was completely different from the original Persian sentence.

In the second sentence, *Erhan fährt im Sommer nach Türkei* was the incorrect answer given by most of the learners. In German, to express a trip to a few countries with articles (Artikel), "in" is used as an article. In Persian, however, there is no difference in traveling to countries, cities, village etc, and "be" (to) is used as the proper preposition. This affected the mind of the learners. The correct answer to this question was "*Erhan fährt*

im Sommer in die Türkei".

Another instance of interference from Persian in German is the ninth question. Many answers to this question were *Er geht morgens nach der Post*. In German, "zu" and "nach" is used to express the move from one part to the other. Going to countries and cities need no preposition, but going to a house needs "nach", and travelling to other places requires "zu" as a preposition. However, in Persian, speakers use "be" for travelling to any kind of place. The majority of the participants in the test could not choose the correct answer, and they were under the influence of their mother tongue. They did not take heed of two prepositions "zu" and "nach" and thus marked the incorrect option. In the field test, the students had a lot of errors, which were due to the interference. In this article a few instances were foregrounded and explained.

6. Conclusion

The analysis and study of the incorrect answers supplied by the freshmen of German showed the influential factors in the emergence of errors. This analysis was carried out to evaluate the competence of the learners in using prepositions and knowing their various applications.

Given the above mentioned section, the comparison of prepositions in the two systems reveals the major difference between Persian and German prepositions. This difference could be summed up in three categories:

- 1- The semantic relationship between Persian and German prepositions is not a one-to-one relationship, and the prepositions could have various meanings under the same conditions.
- 2- Prepositions are grammatically completely different and they enjoy different structure in the two languages.
- 3- The location of prepositions in Persian and English are not necessarily the same.

The extent and variety of prepositions, the existence of many details and subtleties in using them and the necessity of being familiar with them are all the part of German grammar concepts, which decrease the speed of learning and increase the probability of making errors. Errors are caused because of the impact of Persian grammatical rules on the mind of learners and the fact that learners constantly compare the functions and applications of German prepositions with those of their mother tongue. Such conditions could lead to the difficulty in learning German prepositions for Iranian learners and thus the emergence of errors.

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Notes

Note 1. A Persian vowel that is added to words in Persian when they are followed by a noun.

Note 2. چو بشنید رستم سرش خیره گشت جهان پیش چشم اندرش تیره گشت

Note 3. یال خ بیندپا اندرش خواب به خال و خط بر فتنه بداریش به

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